About *Areopagitica*

Commentary by Nicolas Barker

Binding, Collation, and Provenance

John Milton *Areopagitica*

London, 1644

On July 5, 1641 the Long Parliament in England passed two Acts, one abolishing the Court of Star Chamber, the other the ecclesiastical Court of High Commission. On that day the freedom of the press, both as an idea and as a material fact, was born. It was to take some time to grow to maturity, and its first years were not without risks and dangers. In the first place, Parliament had no intention of setting the press free – rather of transferring control into its own hands. But in the interval between July 5, 1641 and June 14, 1643, when it finally got around to tackling the problem, Pandora's box had opened. The Ordinance began by acknowledging the failure of Parliament's previous act: "Whereas, divers good Orders have been lately made by both Houses of Parliament, for suppressing the great late abuses and frequent disorders in Printing many false, forged, scandalous, seditious, libellous and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation of Religion and government, Which orders have taken little or no effect." Then it proceeded to bring back the whole apparatus of licensing, control of imported books, the seizure of presses, the searching of shops and warehouses, the apprehending of "all Authors, Printers, and other persons whatsoever employed in compiling, printing, stitching, binding, publishing and dispersing of the said scandalous, unlicensed, and unwarrantable papers, books and pamphlets."

But it was too late. In two years, political consciousness had come to England, brought by the hundreds of books and pamphlets that had been written and printed in the interval. A century earlier the Protestant Reformation had spread through Germany to the rest of Europe with an equal outburst of controversial literature. Parliament itself had joined in – on November 29, 1641 the first journal of its debates was published. In this it was, unconsciously, answering a new national craving for news that consumed the entire population, literate or not. "In these exciting days that was what they wanted more than anything else and for the first time in English history they got it. They never lost the taste for it" (Robert Birley). Both Royalists and Parliament provided news in abundance, giving their own twist to the narrative and interpretation of the events of the Civil War; they would print and reprint each other's publications, each determined to expound their own merits and the enormities of the other side. So when the Ordinance of June 16, 1643 came out, it had little or no practical effect. But it did create one new and separate area of debate among the mass of topical religious and political controversy.

How free can speech be? How much license can the press be allowed? These were the questions with which the defenders of liberty soon found themselves faced. This was a matter that different people were bound to interpret differently. The extremist, with Voltaire, might say, 'I detest what you say; I will defend to the death your right to say it." But Voltaire was living (or at least speaking) under a repressive regime; whereas most people in seventeenth-century England, newly liberated from such repression, felt a need to determine the boundaries within which freedom of expression might be allowed, without reimposing old sanctions or letting in who-knew-what new dangers. Toleration, by which they meant religious toleration, was the main issue, as it was to be for almost two centuries longer. Was Parliament to govern the Church, or Church the Government? This question was raised rather than answered by the Oath of the Solemn League and Covenant, taken by 112 members of the House of Commons and the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, then drawing up a new "Church Settlement." It roused defenders of the liberty of Parliament, such as William Prynne, defenders of a Calvinistic theocracy such as the Presbyterians represented, Independents, moderate dissenters who were in favour of toleration, and extremists like the Levellers who demanded that "the Presse might be as open for us as for you."

It was against this background and during this time that *Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England* came out, on November 23, 1644. The title, at the time, would have recalled for every schoolboy the speeches made – most famously by Isocrates (354 BC) – before the Areopagus, a legendary Athenian court whose counterpart, for Milton, was the English Parliament. Oddly enough, Milton was not making a contribution to the great debate on church versus state or the limits of toleration, except incidentally. *Aeropagitica* was the result of the response to his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* the previous year. Advocacy of divorce seemed to strike at the roots of any religious society. It was universally condemned, and a divine of the Westminster Assembly demanded from the pulpit that it be burnt. The Stationers' Company, less interested in theology than the preservation of the copyright system (Milton, like most of

his contemporaries, had not obtained a license for the book), joined in the chorus of condemnation. So, first of all, Milton defended himself and his right to express what he had written: "For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this world expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for."

But then Milton moved on to consider a new aspect of the problem, the rights of a book itself, independent of the intention of its author. This provoked the sentences that are among his most memorable utterances:

> Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.
>
> As good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye.
>
> A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

The morality of the issues involved seemed to him beyond argument: "It was from the rind of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leaped forth into the world." Theologically, the position was clear: "To be still searching what we know not by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it (for all her body is homogeneal and proportional), this is the golden rule in theology as well as in arithmetic, and makes up the best harmony in a church." Politically, too, the potential was endless: "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and a puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam." Milton concluded with that unforgettable claim: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."

> Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter.

This last proved to be, immediately, an over-optimistic assertion. Milton's contemporaries, if less shocked by these views than his ideas on divorce, were not significantly impressed, and when the Restoration brought Charles II back to the throne in 1660, the whole apparatus of licensing was brought back with renewed vigor. But *Areopagitica* came into its own again after the Revolution that brought William III to the throne in 1689. The Licensing Act was due to expire in 1693, and Charles Blount, a freethinker in this as in religion, produced two pamphlets on this subject, *A Just Vindication of Learning and of the Liberties of the Press, by Philopatris* and *Reasons Humbly Offered for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*. These pamphlets prove to be largely constructed from extensive borrowings from *Areopagitica*, an act of plagiarism splendidly

castigated by Macaulay: "The literary workmanship of Blount resembled the architectural workmanship of those barbarians who used the Coliseum and the Theatre of Pompey as quarries, built hovels out of Ionian friezes and propped cowhouses on pillars of lazulite." But this unauthorized second edition, for that is what it is, was the first blow in a campaign whose ultimate result was the establishment of freedom, under the law, to print without interference.

It was the result, rather than the course, of this campaign that has made *Areopagitica* famous. Whenever the freedom of speech, or liberty itself, is under threat, Milton's words are recalled. "Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour: England hath need of thee," wrote Wordsworth, a little later, downcast by the "vanity and parade" of his countrymen at a critical moment in the cause of liberty. The same words and sentiments have recurred to many since.

Nicolas Barker

Bibliography

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Nicolas Barker retired as the Head of Conservation at the British Library in 1992. He continues to serve as advisor to libraries and museums in the United Kingdom and in North America, as well as to the British National Trust in its project of cataloguing the libraries of the hundreds of country houses in its care, the riches of which remain almost unknown. His many books include the standard biography of Stanley Morison (1972), accounts of Aldus Manutius and early Greek types, and a study of Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* (1994). Since 1966, he has edited *The Book Collector*, the world's leading journal of scholarly bibliography.

Binding

The binding of *Areopagitica,* dated 1901, is a product of the Zaehnsdorf bindery. Joseph Zaehnsdorf (1816-86) was an Austro-Hungarian bookbinder who arrived in London in 1837, where he established the Zaehnsdorf Bindery in 1842. By the end of the nineteenth century, his son Joseph William Zaehnsdorf (1853-1930), considered to be one of England's preeminent binders, had taken over the management of the firm. Zaehnsdorf Bindery was highly regarded for their fine bindings.

This binding is of brown morocco measuring 7 3/8 x 5 7/16" (187 x 138 mm). The front and back boards are undecorated. The leather turn-ins have a single gold rule near the board edge with another gold rule near the edge of the pastedowns. There are small gold flower tool decorations at the corners bridging the gold rules. The smooth spine, which has the titling running head to tail and gold flower tools on both ends, has been rebacked with the original spine piece reattached.

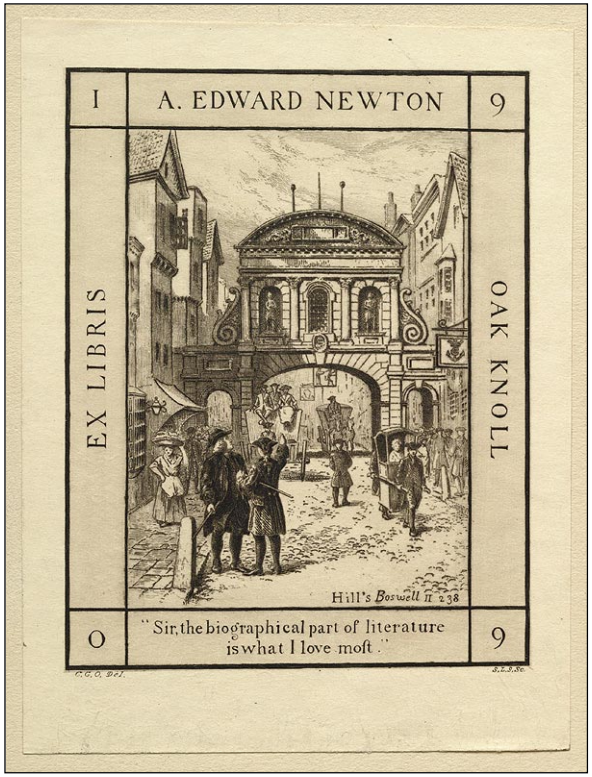
Click here to see binding

Collation 4^0: A-E^4 F^2 [$3 signed]; 22 leaves, pp. [2] 1-40 [2] [=44].

Contents: $A1^a$: printed title page. $A1^b$: blank. $A2^a$-$F1^b$: text. $F2^{a-b}$: blank.

Provenance

The bookplate on the pastedown was engraved for the Pennsylvania collector, author, and electrical manufacturer A. Edward Newton (1864-1940). Oak Knoll was the name of his country house outside Philadelphia. During the period between 1915 and 1940 Newton was the leading American commentator on book collecting – one might even call him a force. The titles of a few of his many books – *The Amenities of Book-*



Collecting (1918), *The Greatest Book in the World* (1925), and *This Book-Collecting Game* (1928) – are redolent of his range and intended audience.

Although there is a book collecting society commemorating Newton, and the foremost American dealer in "books about books" has adopted the name Oak Knoll for his business, Newton's books are now largely unread. They were, however, useful in their time, guiding many an untutored small-town businessman in the art of feeling at ease with famous and expensive books; Newton presented himself as a genial companion who knew the ropes. He was adept at inspiring self-confidence in the nervous neophyte, and at teaching an etiquette of sorts to collectors uncertain of the usages of polite bibliophilic society. Newton was, at the same time, arrogant, pompous, dictatorial, and silly, but he read many of the books he owned, and to his credit, urged others to follow his example. *This Book-Collecting Game*, for instance, includes a list of "One Hundred Good Novels." The hearty "good" is typical of the enthusiast: these were books to be read and enjoyed by the ordinary American citizen.

Newton had absorbed in passing something of the style of his favorite authors. Unfortunately, one of his great enthusiasms was for Samuel Johnson, and few people were less qualified than Newton to affect a Johnsonian manner. In his rarer moments, inspired by Cowper, Goldsmith, or Lamb, Newton is more agreeable. In the roll of bookish journalists, evangelists of "the romance of books," that extends from Dibdin to Hanff or Rostenberg and Stern, Newton occupies an honorable position, very near the top, not the least for his prose, for he is the best stylist of the lot.

Newton was not the sort of collector who pursued unreadable rarities. The fact that a book (like *Areopagitica*) had been reprinted dozens of times attested to its worth and justified its place in a collection. The leap that ordinary readers might make from the paperbacks of their student years to the hardcover editions of middle age, with Newton extended further – to the original printings of the masterpieces of English literature. *Areopagitica* has always been an essential touchstone for the American anglophone and anglophile collector, and is short enough that (as Newton himself might have said) "he who runs may read." Newton owned a copy – "a splendid copy" to quote his posthumous sale catalogue (part 2, 1941, lot 756) – in later full brown levant morocco by Zaehnsdorf. The title, binding, and bookplate neatly triangulate the man.

John Milton. *Areopagitica*. London, 1644. BRIDWELL LIBRARY

Octavo™

AREOPAGITICA;

A

SPEECH

OF

Mr. JOHN MILTON

For the Liberty of VNLICENC'D PRINTING,

To the PARLAMENT of ENGLAND.

Τὰ λἀθεῖν δ' ἐκεῖνο, εἰ πι θέλῃ πόλις
Χρηστόν τι βέλτιμ' εἰς μέσον φέρειν, ἔχειν.
Καὶ ταῦθ' ὁ χρήζων, λαμπρὸς ἐν δ', ὁ μὴ θέλων,
Σιγᾷ, τί τούτων ἐστὶν ἰσοτιμώτερον πόλει;

Euripid. Hicetid.

This is true Liberty when free born men
Having to advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State then this?

Euripid. Hicetid.

LONDON,
Printed in the Yeare, 1644.